

Southeast Asia

Jonathan Rigg, *More Than Rural: Textures of Thailand's Agrarian Transformation*

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This work offers a longitudinal perspective of the agrarian transformation in Thailand. The author's exploration of the Thai countryside spans three and a half decades. It commenced at a time when the country was being referred to as the next Asian Tiger. Contrary to the neoliberal philosophy sweeping much of the world during Thailand's aggressive economic development in the late 1980s, rural Thailand has followed a different path. Rigg presents an illuminating slant on agrarian change by leading readers through a thought-provoking investigation of rural Thailand.

The book is divided into ten detailed chapters. The author starts the first chapter, which is also the introduction, by addressing what he sees as a paradox between the continued importance of the countryside with its "progressive diminution," a contraction in and of itself. To support his argument, "the rural" is delineated into three nomenclatures. The first is the classic definition that one might expect to associate with the countryside; the second accommodates the social norms and values inherent to the individual regardless of physical location; while the third lays the foundation for the book, building up the rural as something more. The third, rural, while trying to maintain linkages to the first and second, does so only loosely. The author steers away from the more abstract distinctions of the rural by building on the critical discourses that he presents over the next eight chapters.

Chapter 2, "Inheritances," the first of the eight core chapters, sets the stage for the author's main argument by providing a brief history of the agrarian transformation in rural Thailand while appraising some of the earliest rural village studies. The research methodology used in early village studies was rather obtuse. This led the author to argue that the normative understanding of the countryside, what he refers to as the primordial village community, is distinctly different from the more modern village settlement. The context in which early studies defined and demarcated, in spatial terms, the rural, makes it difficult for scholars to contrast it with the modern village settlement. This issue of interpretation and the developmental transformation in rural Thailand are discussed further in the next chapter.

Chapter 3, "Spaces," continues to advance the author's position that rural Thailand is more than rural. It is effectively accomplished through an in-depth discussion of the urban/rural dichotomy and supported with innovative tools for conceptualizing the contemporary countryside. Before transforming into the more modern rural settlements we know today, the livelihood of villagers in the countryside centered on rice farming: "to be a villager was to be a rice farmer" (49). The author turns to Nobel laureate Amartya Sen to further his discussion on what constitutes a life worth living. In the case of villagers, this means farming. This intrinsic feeling of community within the village settlement is a measurement of subjective well-being. From this point, the reader accelerates through Thailand's high-paced economic development where it went from a low-income to upper-middle-income country in just over three decades. During this period, the dichotomy between rural and urban identities became blurred.

The author illustrates this development through the lens of two rural villages—providing evidence of urbanization in the countryside contrasted with rural migration to the urban centers, by which “the urban mentally shapes the rural and vice versa” (64).

Chapter 4, “Flourishing,” explores how ideologies and policies have shaped the country’s development and investigates whether this has had a positive impact on human flourishings in the countryside. The transition between chapters is frail but necessary to support the author’s contention regarding “the limitations of taking a money-metric, poverty-based approach to progress” (88), specifically, with regards to development policy. This perspective was correctly supported by identifying the shift from a basic needs approach to policy development to the more widely discussed sufficiency economy (SE) approach that Thailand is known for. The author also identifies many of the SE approach’s shortcomings, predominantly with regards to human development—leading to a discussion on human flourishings or in Greek *eudaimonia*, which Aristotle equates to happiness, the goal for both life and political policy. This notion of flourishing brings the author back to the work of Amartya Sen; unfortunately, he stops short of introducing Sen’s seminal work on the capability approach. Sen’s approach could address some of the author’s criticisms regarding SE, particularly his reproach as to why SE has found such limited traction over much of rural Thailand. The chapter concludes by rightly reiterating the need to focus on well-being but leaves the reader less than satisfied.

Chapter 5, “Society,” reengages the reader by providing an interesting statistic. Thailand has remained mostly rural, despite its rapid economic development (90). Moreover, the author presents a modernized family structure that is more spatially divided due to migration and more difficult to define due to social coherence. To illustrate this, readers are invited into the life of Mr. and Mrs. Weerakul, a smallholder couple with a daughter working in Bangkok and whose children are being raised by their father’s grandparents living Ban Nam (101). This family dynamic is not entirely unusual by the author’s own account and supports his argument that it is necessary to reevaluate how rural Thailand—especially the countryside—is defined.

Chapters 6 and 7, “Land” and “Labor” respectively, provide a natural progression following the author’s investigation into the social condition of the rural. Chapter 6 expands on why and how smallholdings in rural Thailand have remained so resilient to economic stressors. Over fifty-three years, the average area of farm holdings has dropped by only .3 hectares (118). The author offers five possible arguments while implying some universality to his theory. Nonetheless, he leaves the reader wondering how substance agriculture, such as rice farming in Thailand, can still generate enough rice to be the second-largest exporter of rice globally. This paradox does not get addressed. One could assume that the 3.2 hectares that the average smallholder tends is more than subsistence agriculture. Although the author states that Thailand has not taken advantage of economies of scale in agriculture, it is still a smallholder society where farming is less a business than a way of life (122). This way of life creates some challenges and barriers, which are discussed throughout chapter 6 and into chapter 7.

Chapter 8, “Livelihoods,” does a nice job of tying the previous chapters together by examining how the agrarian transformation in the rural has influenced the livelihood of its citizens irrespective of space. On initial reflection, the linkage between livelihood and agrarian transformation is not clear. However, the author provides clarity by correctly turning to the work of Robert Chambers and his approach to sustainable rural

livelihoods. This approach utilizes elements of SE, such as coping with stressors and shocks, along with elements of Sen's approach that explore capabilities and functionings. He nicely packages these approaches, which are purposefully open to interpretation, with Deborah Bryceson's notation of "deagrarianization" but cautions against some of its fundamental principles, specifically as they relate to the movement of societal structures (170). When deliberating deagrarianization, the author argues that Bryceson's multidimensional process does not account for spatial interpenetration. He supports this claim through a longitudinal study conducted around the northeast province of Maha Sarakham—showing how rural livelihoods extend beyond clearly delineated borders and how farming has moved from a primary to a more tertiary activity.

Chapter 9, "Class," is the last of the core chapters. It synthesizes the author's narrative from the previous chapters to help define the identity of citizens living in the countryside. Historically viewed as peasants, this categorization of people living in the countryside may no longer be suitable. The author's contribution to this popular discourse is to move beyond the stereotypical class distinction and view the traditional peasantry as something more. The post-productivist position of the author has been vividly illustrated throughout the previous chapters—guiding readers through an ethnographic account of the transformation taking place in the Thai countryside. It is a challenge to discuss class distinctions and identity in Thailand without touching on the Red Shirt/Yellow Shirt movements. This book was no exception, particularly since the Red Shirts are synonymous with the rural countryside, where they are referred to as Red Buffalo. Buffalo, as the author describes in his first chapter, is a term used to refer to rural farmers as "slow moving, dim, and loyal but easily led astray" (3). This label is contested by the author but conceded in the sense that as a political movement the Red Shirts fall along grassroots ideologies regardless of class distinctions.

Chapter 10, "Futures," reiterates the author's discourse that rural Thailand is more than rural—as a unit of measurement and as a space for scholarship. The author convincingly argues the distinction between the Thai rural and rural Thailand while proposing two alternative yet extreme paths forward. At one extreme is classic modernization, which by the author's own account could lead Thailand out of its middle-income trap, and at the other is the status quo where smallholders continue their distributed livelihoods impeding economic progress for regressive economic security.

More Than Rural guides readers through an enlightening perspective on the importance of the Thai countryside. It uses a combination of longitudinal research mixed with socio-economic approaches to explore how Thailand's agrarian transformation is reshaping the livelihood aspects of citizens regardless of shifting societal structures. While economists may find Rigg's assertions unfulfilling, his book caters to a broad audience of readers from the social sciences and delivers a compelling story of the rural complemented with rich ethnographic research.

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